ResearchGate

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373302138

MATRIARCHY IN TRADITIONAL AFRICA AND ITS RELEVANE TO CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM

Article · January 2023

CITATIONS
0

READS
282

1 author:

Evaristus Emeka Isife
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
26 PUBLICATIONS **47** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

All content following this page was uploaded by Evaristus Emeka Isife on 23 August 2023.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 9. No. 4. (2023)
ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University, Umunya

MATRIARCHY IN TRADITIONAL AFRICA AND ITS RELEVANE TO CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM

Evaristus Emeka Isife, PhD
Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria
emekaisife@gmail.com: ee.isife@stu.unizik.edu.ng
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2016-9674.
DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.25001.77923

Abstract

Bachofen and other evolutionary theorists gave an elaborate narration on how matriarchy began, rose, fell and was replaced by patriarchy. The conclusion is that patriarchy is superior to matriarchy and thus, is the culmination of human development. This position justifies male supremacy and the exploitive and domineering character of patriarchy. Feminism arose to fight for the equality of men and women in society. This research examines matriarchy in the traditional African worldview. Using the method of hermeneutics, the research attempts to interpret available data on the subject matter in accordance with the present reality. The research tries to address these issues: what is the meaning of matriarchy in traditional Africa? In traditional Africa, is matriarchy inferior and in opposition to patriarchy as seen in the Western world? Would feminism have risen in traditional Africa? And how can matriarchy in traditional Africa enrich contemporary feminism? The research finds out that in traditional Africa both patriarchy and matriarchy are like two sides of a coin: they interacted, intersected and checked and balanced each other in their different but related spheres of power and influence through the principle of complementarity. The research finds out that contemporary feminism is being entrapped in the same flaws it accuses patriarchy of- flaws of exclusion. The research concludes that contemporary feminism needs to understand and apply the principle of complementarity in its approach for it to succeed in its fight for the equality of men and women in contemporary society.

Keywords: Traditional, African, Matriarchy, Relevance, Contemporary, Feminism.

Introduction

In the last century, certain theories have been advanced by scholars on the existence of matriarchal and patriarchal phases in the development of human society. On the one hand, some scholars, prominent among them Henry Maine (1861), argued that the patriarchal system of authority was the original and universal system of social organisation.

It was further contended that the matriarchal system was only an unstable and degraded form of social organisation which only occurred where women outnumbered men. On the other hand, according to Bachofen (1861) in his *Das Mutterecht*, matriarchy was the original primate stage of culture, preceding patriarchy. Bachofen (1861) has argued that before matriarchy there had been, in the history of each society, a state of sexual promiscuity, with no stable family life. Thus, he saw each society as evolving through three phases: promiscuity, matriarchy and patriarchy, which is the culmination of human development.

Furthermore, the most noticeable characteristic of these theories was their very sweeping posture. These theories tried to postulate a pattern of development which would be true for every society. This tendency betrayed these theories as part of the whole colonial and capitalist project aimed at the domination and suppression of a part of a class or a section of society. So, patriarchy was projected by these theories as being superior and better than matriarchy. This point is made clearer by Bahlieda (2015:17) when he says that "an encompassing, overarching, multidisciplinary ideology that affects everyone – men and women alike- across multiple cultures, histories, religions, economies, geographies, and institutions." Thus, the fight for the liberation of the people from colonialism, which is a struggle for the liberation of the people from the domination of the few, brought about the fight for the liberation of women from the domination of men under the umbrella of patriarchy. So, feminism arose to fight against the patriarchal patrimony of society. Williams (2003: 74) was so correct when he observed that "the problem with patriarchal, masculinist institutions is not that men are in charge or that men hold important posts. The interest of a feminist is to show that such structures and institutions are rooted in masculinist presumption and patriarchal framework." Unfortunately, feminism falls into the same fallacy of generalization that the evolutionary theorists found themselves. Williams (2003:83) was quick to notice this as he observers:

> Historically, therefore, it is a defeatist inclination if feminism is seen as constructing a universal paradigm of women's experiences which much of what serves as the content of its central grievances is the surmounting of Western patriarchy, not universal patriarchy. This is because women's experiences globally cannot be regarded as monolithic.

So, contemporary feminism has failed to take cognizance of the unique experiences of women all over the world who are suffering from

different shades of patriarchy. In Africa, it is even worse, as African women are battling with the two-pronged predicament of being both a woman and a black. Colonialism has created an environment of strife, conflict, and contradicting positions that contemporary feminism has fallen into. Hence patriarchy and matriarchy are been presented as two opposite positions of which one should be greater and should prevail. This is a consequence of the evolutionary conception of human development that presented patriarchy as the culmination of human development. On the other hand, many scholars are now moving towards the position, that instead of a universal transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, humanity has from the beginning been divided into two geographically distinct cradles of which one is favourable to the flourishing of patriarchal and the other to that of matriarchal, that these systems encountered one another and even disputed with each other as different societies, that in certain places they were superimposed on each other and even existed side by side. This is very near to the conception of these realities in traditional Africa.

In continuation, in traditional Africa, patriarchal and matriarchal are not seen as opposites but as complementary. Thus, in traditional Africa, it is not a question of when or where patriarchy or matriarchy held sway but understanding the spheres of patriarchy and matriarchy in the same society. Hence, Dine (2007: 96) agrees with the position that in African "traditional society, the problem of women's emancipation did not exist because traditional society understood the positions of the sexes differently from what obtains in modern societies." There is a clear demarcation and distinction between the roles and functions of males and females in traditional Africa. It is the argument of this research that matriarchal in traditional Africa plays a complementary role to patriarchal in the same society. The understanding of the distinctive roles of males and females in traditional Africa through the application of the principle of complementarity has helped in bringing about unity and stability in traditional Africa. What is matriarchy in traditional Africa and what is its relevance to contemporary feminism? This is the focus of this research. But it is important to first clarify important concepts employed in the research.

Clarifications of Concepts

It is important to clarify important concepts that are used in this research. In the first place, patriarchy, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a hypothetical social system in which the father or the male elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, one or more men (as in a council) exert absolute authority over the

community as a whole. The theories of biological evolution developed by Charles Darwin served as an impetus to many 19th-century scholars who developed a theory of unilinear cultural evolution. This theory, which was championed by Bachofen(1861), proposed that human social organisation evolved through a series of stages: animalistic sexual promiscuity, matriarchy and patriarch. Patriarchy is presented as the culmination of human organisation.

Moreover, According to Uberoi (1995: 196), "the term matriarchy was used in the nineteenth to designate the hypothetical form of society in which women were leaders and rulers. Anthropologists now agree that there was no evidence to substantiate the claim that any society has ever come under such control." Still on this, Staples (1981:27) defines matriarchy as " a society in which some, if not all, of legal powers relating to the ordering and governing of the family – power over property, over inheritance, over marriage, over-the-house – are lodged in women rather than men." Many scholars, especially, Staples,(1981), and Gould and Kolb, (1964), argue that despite the various myths about matriarchy, real matriarchy never existed in history. The present study aligns with Farrar (1997: 582) that the concern of scholars "should not be whether a genuine matriarchy ever existed in Africa or elsewhere for that matter. What we truly seek is an understanding of the political power and range of social status available to women in ancient and pre-colonial African societies." The research, therefore, tries to examine the scope of political power available to women in traditional Africa. This is what it means by matriarchy in traditional Africa.

Furthermore, traditional Africa has to do with the African worldview as was in existence before the incursion of the West into Africa with slavery and colonialism. Traditional African, according to Isife (2022b:51- 52), "can be sought out from three areas: communalism(social), religious and ethics or values" uninfluenced by foreign accretion. In traditional Africa, patriarchy and matriarchy are seen not as evolutionary or contradictory terms as seen in the Western conception, but as complementary spheres of power control. Traditional matriarchy is about the scope and status of political power available to women in traditional African societies. Today, Africa has changed but her social, religious and ethical aspects of living are areas where "traditional Africans left their imprint on the sand of time."(Isife, 2022b:52). Hence, traditional Africa through these areas still exists in contemporary Africa.

In continuation, the principle of Complementarity was first employed by Bohr (1950) in quantum mechanics, a branch of Physics. According to Bohr (1928), nature has complementary aspects: an experiment which illustrates one of these aspects necessarily obscures the complementary aspect. To put in another expression, one can observe that each experiment or sequence of experiments yields only a limited amount of information about the system under investigation. Hence, as one piece of information is gained, other equally interesting information (which could have been obtained from another sequence of experiments) is lost. Explaining further the meaning of the complementarity principle, Asouzu (2004:96) maintains that " the human mind cannot operate without contraries and we know due to the ability of the mind to contrast and differentiate. It is for this reason that we know certain ideas better if we can contrast them with what they are not." It is within the principle of complementarity that one can appreciate the meaning of patriarchy and matriarchy in traditional Africa.

Finally, feminism refers to a range of political and social movements and ideologies based on the belief that women should have the same rights, opportunities and power as men, and be treated in the same way. Hence, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines feminism as the advocacy of the rights of women based on the theory of equality of the sexes. What then, is the relationship between patriarchy and feminism? Allen(1999: 1087) answers that: "the very conception of patriarchy as a historical phenomenon, contingent on time and place, provided the basis for the emergence of a feminist critique of male supremacy, both in the past and in the present, that has continued throughout the century." In continuation, Williams (2003: 80 -81) maintains that: "feminism consists in the search for the method for the defence of women against the entrenched patriarchal system which tends to dominate women in social and political realm of social existence." So, feminism fights the patriarchal system of society to restore gender equality to society. Feminism is complex, vast and fragmented. Hence feminism has resulted in various and different movements, with each fighting for the liberation of women from its perspective. Today, one can talk of radical feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, the Lesbian separatist movement, womanism feminism and so on. Feminist movements have been described in terms of "waves." Therefore contemporary feminism encompasses all the different divisions and waves of feminism since all are geared towards fighting for the rights of women based on the principle of equality of the sexes. The word contemporary as applied to feminism implies feminism as it is in the present moment.

Matriarchy in Traditional Africa

Whenever the issue of matriarchy in traditional Africa is brought up, there are always divergent views on whether matriarchy existed in traditional Africa and if yes, what is it. But really, it is through the understanding of what matriarchy is that one can affirm or deny its existence. Women play important roles in traditional Africa. In traditional Africa, the problem of women's emancipation or feminism did not exist because people understood the positions and roles of the sexes which are contrary to what is obtained in modern-day society. There are two major approaches to studying the roles of women in traditional Africa. One is through the study of the roles played by royal and aristocratic women in traditional Africa. Many scholars have used the cases of powerful women or queens in traditional Africa to prove the existence of matriarchy in traditional Africa. The other approach, which this study follows, is to study the status and political authority accorded to women generally in traditional Africa. Hence, supporting this approach, Farrar(1997: 582), has argued that the concern should be to seek "an understanding of the political power and range of social statuses available to women in ancient and later pre–colonial African societies."

Moreover, the concept of "matriarchy" has to be interpreted away from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century European cultural evolutionists understanding of it as contrary and opposite of patriarchy. In traditional Africa, patriarchy and matriarchy are complementary realities which depend on and enforce each other. Of course, this is different from the Western conception of patriarchy and matriarchy as contraries and opposites which are in antagonism with each other and where patriarchy is placed as the acme of civilization and matriarchy as the greatest symbol of savagery. Many scholars, especially African feminists, argue that patriarchy and matriarchy in traditional Africa are opposed to each other. It is in this regard that Amadiume(1998,19) maintains that:

> This ideology of gender had its basis in the binary opposition between the *mkpuke*, the female mother–focused matricentric unit and the *obi*, the male–focused ancestral house. The structure of relationship, in the Levi – Straussian sense, between two paradigmatical gender structures, reflected in the wider social organisation and politics of Nnobi, the contest between the moral kinship ideology of motherhood and the jural force of patriarchy.

But many African scholars see this view as arising from Western influence on those who held the view. That is why Farrar (1997, 582)

opines that, in studying matriarchy in traditional Africa, "we wish to more thoroughly free ourselves and our scholarship from the biases that characterize Eurocentric worldview and models of history." Hence, the relationship between patriarchy and matriarchy, just like many other realities in traditional Africa, follows the principle of complementarity. The argument is that matriarchy in traditional Africa cannot be adequately understood in isolation from patriarchy. Neither can the two be separated from each other. Mkpuke and *obi*, *umunne* and *umunna* are two sides of a coin in the Igbo/ African worldview. So, in traditional Africa, both patriarchy and matriarchy exist side by side, interact with each other and each of them has its sphere of power. This research is geared towards exploring and exposing the spheres of influence of matriarchy in traditional Africa.

In continuation, sex distinction plays a key factor in leadership organisation in traditional Africa. This implies that there are areas where women exercise their power and influence and there are areas where men likewise do theirs. The important thing is that society sees the roles or functions of men and women as complementary and as important in bringing about stability to society. According to Dine (2007, 96), "By sex distinction, we mean the separation of male from female in matters of leadership." The feminists' aphorism that what a man can do, a woman can do better, has no place in traditional Africa. There are leadership roles assigned to men or women because of their nature as men and women respectively. So the roles assigned to women are expressed or carried out in the context of matriarchal leadership.

Moreover, the important question to ask is, does matriarchy in traditional Africa implies that there is gender equality in traditional Africa? Of course, Abendroth and Smith(2008:49) answer immediately that matriarchal "patterns are not just a reversal of patriarchy, with women somehow ruling men – as the usual misinterpretation would have it – rather they are, without exception, gender–egalitarian societies, and in many cases, full egalitarian societies." But, not agreeing that traditional African society is egalitarian, Omegoha (2022: 33), argues that "women have similar status with children, and in like manner were beaten frequently by men." Although there are some elements of truth in this latter position, as not everything done by our forbearers was good, the point remains that the concept of gender equality as it is known today is strange to traditional Africans. And the present understanding of gender equality cannot be adequately applied to traditional Africa if one should be fair to them and their history.

Furthermore, it has been argued that, in traditional Africa, men are superior to women. Hence, Dine(2007:96 – 97) supports the claim as he states that Africans "conceive existence and things that exist as real and going in pairs – one naturally being higher or superior to the other… God created heavens, igwe or elu and Ala (sky and land), male and female, ala ndi mmuo na ala ndi mmadu(land of spirit and land of humans). The first in each pair is always higher than and superior to the other." This position affirms that women are under men. Hence, Basden(1983: 88) supports this position as he maintains that " women have but few rights in any circumstances, and can only hold such property as their Lord's permit." Is man taken to be superior to women in traditional Africa? If so, why? The answers to these questions require further interrogation of traditional Africa which is ongoing and this research is a great impetus to that.

Furthermore, another aspect of matriarchy in traditional Africa is the dual-sex character of its political system. This means that any position a man attains or acquires that his chief wife or wives attain or acquire the same. Hence, collaborating on this point, Farrar(1997:6) observes " this practice of maintaining separate, parallel political hierarchies for the female and male sections of the population is a fundamental and presumably ancient feature of Akan political organisation." This dual-sex character of the political system in traditional Africa is also observed by Okonjo(1976) who studied the political organisation of the Western Igbo of Nigeria. Okonjo(1976: 46) posits that "the monarchs were the male "Obi", who in theory was the acknowledged head of the whole community, and the female "Omu", who in theory was the acknowledged mother of the whole community but who in practice was charged with concern for the female section." Therefore, the division of spheres of power between men and women starts from the family and moves up to the community. Although there are spheres of power and areas of jurisdiction between men and women in traditional Africa, yet, the male is seen as the general overseer or supervisor of the affairs of the family or the community as the case may be.

Finally, in traditional Africa, it is in the typical family setting that the sphere of power of matriarchy is well appreciated. In the traditional family, there is a man with his wife. There is the man's hut (his Obi) which is the seat of power of his family and each of his wives has a place for cooking(Ekwu) and a hut(Mkpuke) where she and her children leave. The role of the Obi both as the seat of power and the power of the man over her family is more of supervisory and general control. The research agrees with Amadiume(1998) that the mkpuke is

the centre of matriarchy. It is where women exercise their power in the family and society as wives and mothers. But, both the Obi and Nkpuke, as Asouzo(2004) argued, play complementary roles in the family. For instance, a married woman answered the name of her father instead of her husband's name. The researcher's maternal and maternal grandmothers continued to answer their fathers' names till they died. Also, it is the right of the woman in many African cultures, especially Igbo, to give names to their children. The child also answers the name of her mother for better recognition not that of her father. The child answers the name of his father mostly when there is a need to honour him. This intricacy confirms the African philosophy that the mother is supreme (*Nneka*) in traditional Africa.

Dimensions of Matriarchy in Traditional African

Having examined what matriarchy in traditional Africa is all about, the next point is to look at the dimensions of matriarchy in traditional Africa. The sphere of power of matriarchy in traditional Africa is broad but most of the time not noticed easily. The first dimension of matriarchy in traditional Africa is the economic dimension. Women play important roles in advancing the economy of the community. This economic dimension can be traced back to the family. According to Amadiume(1998: 19)," The mkpuke, which I regard as the matricentric structure of matriarchy, is the smallest kinship unit and the smallest production unit. It is a good example of where the structure of the production unit determines the consumption unit for it is a unit which eats what it produces." Hence, matriarchy is the economic base of the family as it determines the production, distribution and consumption of goods. Women in traditional Africa were seen as the main drivers of agriculture which is the main economic earning of traditional Africa. Polygamy is highly valued in traditional Africa because it was believed that more wives bring more wealth and riches to men. Also, women are fully in charge of markets in traditional Africa.

Furthermore, every woman in traditional Africa is being trained towards acquiring the qualities of a good mother. Women as mothers are the foundation of the social life of the community. In Igbo, it is a mother (nne) before father (nna) and the Igbo believe that "Nne ka" means that the mother is supreme. Confirming this line of thought, Onukawa(1998, 208) opines that " this is because, despite Igbo patriarchy, matriarchal forces are subterranean and mystical in the culture. Matriarchal heritage is superior and this explains why *Ala*, the greatest Igbo deity is a female." Socialization in traditional Africa is based on matriarchy. Although it may seem that women are silent in

traditional Africa they control the greater part of the social life of the community be it marriage, cultural festivals, rite of passage, title taking etc. The maternity of children is taken more seriously than paternity. This is one of the reasons why children answer the name of their mother or maternal uncle. The Igbo used to say, "nwa ka ugwu n'igwunne ya" meaning a child is accorded more respect in her mother's place of birth.

In continuation, scholars, like Basden (1982: 88), think that the only place left for traditional African women is the home. But this is not so. Hence, according to Asiimire and Twinamatsiko(2021: 5), "the political power that women had in the pre-colonial Ankole was very instrumental resulting from the collective voice that women had, unlike men. The Council of wise women and women courts were established to preserve and uphold women's dignity." The point is that women as mothers play active roles in their different families. Thus, women as wives receive the same status as their husbands. Also, women as groups play important roles in organizing the community. Among the various women groups in traditional Africa, two are well known. Dine(2007: 129) notes that: "there are associations of two essential groups of those who are married and are living with their husbands: the married ones living with their husbands are called (Ndiom ala) and daughters married out to other places are called (umuada/umuokpu)." The daughters of the land married outside the land(umuada) is the most powerful organisation in Igboland. It is more powerful than the organisation of married men in the community(Umunna). Ubesie (1978), in Dine (2007: 131), was correct to have noted that: " in any village, when the umuada as a group, decides their capacity as daughters of the land, nobody dares to go against it." Hence, Umuada is like the present Supreme Court which is the final destination of all cases and the last locus of judgment.

Finally, in traditional Africa, the Earth Goddess (Ala) is a female and plays a key role in sustaining the peace and unity of the community. Hence, Abendroth and Smith(2008: 51) are correct when they explain that:

> In matriarchy, divinity is immanent, for the whole world is regarded as divine, feminine divine. This is evident in the widely held concept of the universe as the Great Goddess who created everything and of the earth as the Great Mother who brings forth everything living. And everything is endowed with divinity, each woman and man, each plant and animal, the smallest pebble and the biggest star.

Although, men are her priests the presence of the Earth deity is to preserve and sustain the femininity and female values of the community. There is a great link and interaction between the dead, the living and the unborn which is perpetuated through the knowledge and worship of the Earth Goddess. Crimes that violate motherhood, like fratricide, adultery, and stealing of yams, are grave and offend the deity. Many sanctions are put in place to make both men and women uphold the matriarchal values of the community. Although women are not fully involved in certain religious rites once a woman attains the age of menopause, she is taken as a man and plays the same or similar religious role as a man. According to Carswell (2003), most cultural activities in traditional Africa centre on upholding or preserving the feminine values of the society. One sees this in celebrations of rites of passage, childbirth celebrations, and marriage and death ceremonies. In these celebrations and ceremonies, women play centre roles.

Contemporary Feminism and Gender Equality

Feminism can be defined as "the struggle for equal rights, and as a political and social movement. It has been described in terms of 'waves"(Martha Easton, 2012,99). There are up to three or four such waves. The first wave started within the context of the bourgeois revolutions, precisely of the American and French revolutions of 1776 and 1789 respectively. This first wave has its foundation in the Seneca Falls Convention held in New York in 1848, where more than 200 women gathered and discussed the social, religious and civil rights of women. But it was only in 1920 that America ratified the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. Thus, for Easton(2012, 99), the achievement of the first wave of feminism is "women's suffrage."

Moreover, Williams (2003) was quick to observe that after the achievement of women's suffrage in the 1920s, there arose an enduring division within feminism between the feminist objective of equal rights with men in the public domain and the recognition of women's differences with men to enhance women's status in the private sphere of the family. This gave rise to the second wave of feminism which was concerned with fighting against wider inequality in society, trying to break the age-long stereotypes that maintain the disadvantages, especially to women. There are many strands of the second wave of feminism. For example, Liberal feminism fought against domestic violence, for the provision of equal working status for both men and women and the right of women to decide on their reproduction. The achievement of the second wave of feminism is social equality. But

whether the wave was successful in this regard became a big issue for the third wave of feminism.

In continuation, the third wave of feminism, according to Easton(2012: 99), "focused more on identity politics in the attempt to correct what some perceived as a lack of attention to race, class, religion, and other markers of difference between women." Third wavers fought for the redefinition of womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality femininity and masculinity. It has been noted that while second-wavers were trying to establish sexual liberation, third-wavers tends to claim that gender identity and sexuality have been formed by society, and everyone should be able to choose and express their authentic gender identity. The third wavers fought the stereotypical image of women where women are seen as highly demanding, weak and dependent. They want women to have a powerful image and control of their sexuality (Burkett& Brunell, 2020). Third-wavers have continued to criticize second-wave feminism as exclusive, whitish, rigid, judgmental, anti-male, anti femininity and anti-fun. Although there are some elements of truth in this, Snyder(2008, 180) maintains that "while it is commendable that third-wave feminism makes diversity a central feature, it is a misconception to believe that second–wave feminism was composed of all white, middle-class women." Hence there are writings of feminists of colour that are parts of the second wave. Also, third-wave feminism emerged from a strand of second-wave.

The diverse tone of the third wave makes it appeal to contemporary feminist movements especially Third World feminism and transnational feminism. So, Third World feminism and transnational feminism have one common objective against second-wave feminism and this has to do with their rejection of unfounded universalism of white feminism and their emphasis on Third World Women's complex and intersecting oppressions as well as their multiple forms of resistance to women's oppression. But they differ in that Third World feminism is concerned about the Third World women's actions in their particular localized or nationalized context but transnational is primarily interested in feminist organizations and movements as they occur outside and beyond individual nation-states at the transnational level (Herr: 2014).

Finally, according to Grady (2018), quoted in Bakytzhanova(2020), fourth-wave feminism, which started in 2010, created a pro – sexualization, pro–skinny, anti-fat movement. It also created a hashtag "Me too" on social media to fight against harassment, violence, and overall stereotypical views about women. The fourth wave is unlike the

third wave for it uses the internet and social media as its main tool with which it opens the door to intersect with other movements like anti–racism, trans-sexuality, LGBT community. This research agrees with Barkytzhanova(2020) that the first and second waves of feminism achieved much by getting women the right to vote, fighting for equality in working places and spaces in many spheres and spreading awareness of domestic violence. But the conflictual views and diffused goals of the third and fourth waves seem to be a drawback to the achievements of the first two waves. This has led to what Dean(2010: 9) described as "two relevant sets of narratives" regarding feminism. The first set of these narratives are melancholic narratives that present feminism as having gone into decline as a result of shifts in feminist goals and divergent and conflicting views of feminists. And the second narratives are those with positive tones that celebrate the re-emergence of dynamic feminism in recent years. This Dean(2010: 13) that: "they both converge in their emphasis on a feminist paradigm break between qualitatively different old and new feminisms. In so doing, both sets of narratives arguably over-emphasize break and discontinuity over continuity across time." But one thing is clear from this; there is still room for evaluation and progress as women are still oppressed and there is still gender inequality in society. This is why it is important to examine how matriarchy in traditional Africa can help to advance this cause for gender equality in Contemporary society.

Relevance of Traditional Matriarchy to Contemporary Feminism

Traditional African matriarchy is still alive to a greater degree in Contemporary Africa. It is important to examine how African Matriarchy will be of help in advancing the cause of gender equality in contemporary society. In the first place, the African worldview is rooted in dualism, which refers "to parts of interconnected and interactive concepts, which may or may not be opposite." It is this dualism that will help one appreciate the relationship between matriarchy and patriarchy in Traditional Africa. Western patriarchy was boosted by colonialism, and colonialism focused its attention on universalizing the Western culture and turning in it into a paradigm for all. In the same vein, western patriarchy universalized the male experience and turns it into a paradigm for all human beings. Of course, the evolutionists made every effort to demonstrate that patriarchy was the peak of human development. So, feminism started as an opposition principle to patriarchy. One of the errors of feminism, however, according to Williams (2003: 83), is "constructing a paradigm of women's experiences in a way that seems universal in scope." But dualism in traditional Africa allows matriarchy and patriarchy to interact as

complementary principles. Hence the principle of complementarity as located in traditional Africa needs to be applied to contemporary feminism. This will help feminism to see differences in males and females not as points of division and quarrel but that of interaction, dialogue and cooperation. It will enable feminism to see weaknesses in patriarchy as a vacuum to be filled with its own different but related principles.

Moreover, in traditional Africa, there is a division of labour and distinction of the sexes. The principle of matriarchy in traditional Africa allows both men and women to know their sexes, respect their sexes and carry out their functions according to their gender. Hence, there is a difference between ontological equality and functional equality. Ontologically, traditional Africa believes that men and women are equal. But functionally, understanding traditional African matriarchy will help one to appreciate that function has more to do with equity rather than equality. One of the travails of feminism is its principle that "what a man can do, a woman can do better." Feminism has to acknowledge that there is a distinction between man and woman and both equality and equity have to be considered whenever one talks of what a man can do or what a woman can do. Elaborating more on this, Dine (2007: 100) asserts: "Women recognize positively their distinctive position and roles before men. They are under men not as slaves but as integral parts of the African Philosophy of family. The recognition of the role of motherhood of the womenfolk is universally upheld and indispensable element in the organisation of leadership." It is this superior role of mother in the society as represented in matriarchy that feminism is daily sacrificing at the altar of women's liberation. This has affected both the family and society negatively.

Furthermore, matriarchy in traditional Africa is the foundation of the family. In traditional Africa, motherhood is the greatest demonstration of matriarchy. Mother is supreme in Africa. This point is made clearer by Diop (1989: 32), as he says that "in Black Africa, it is almost everywhere thought that a child owes more from a biological point of view to his mother than to his father… a child is wholly what its mother is and only half of what its father is." Hence, a mother should first take charge of her family for her to take charge of society. Traditional African women understood this fact and were really in charge of the family. So, Sesanti (2016:489) is correct to say that in traditional Africa "paternity is a probability and maternity is certain." Also in traditional Igbo African society, the women's organisation, *Umuada*, is the most powerful political organisation. Contemporary women should look to

the family as the root of women's liberation. Contemporary families are in tumult because women are no longer in control of the families. So, Taiwo(2010: 232) is correct that "the survival of the family *depends* fundamentally on the women."

In continuation, matriarchy in traditional Africa is paradigmatic to contemporary feminism. Diop(1989) understands African matriarchy as a shift of focus from the man at the centre of control of power to the primacy of the role of the mother in economic, social, political and religious institutions. Hence, Amadiume(1998: 80) correctly observes that " the European writers did not seem to have had a parallel historical experience of mother-focused systems to draw from. Their patriarchal paradigm was taken from the fixed point of the father." Unfortunately, it is this patriarchal paradigm that feminism encountered and was consumed by it. Thus, contemporary feminism, in the words of Williams (2003:83), has"fallen into the error of constructing a paradigm of women's experiences in a way that seems universal in scope." Feminism is founded in the principle of monism but traditional African matriarchy operates within the principle of complementarity. Thus, for contemporary feminism to be inclusive, including all women, especially black women, it has to change from the principle of monism to that of dualism or complementarity.

Finally, matriarchy in traditional Africa is a custodian of nature and protector of the environment. This is hinged on the fact that, as Amadiume(1998: 101) reiterates, traditional African matriarchy was " couched in a very powerful goddess–based religion, a strong ideology of motherhood, and a general moral principle of love." Hence there is a strong relationship between the land and the earth goddess(Ala). So the land, in the words of Kanu(2021), "is not just a solid part of the universe, it is the mother that is the abode of the living and the dead as human beings come from it and are buried in its belly. It is regarded as a person and not just a thing to be used when needed. It is a person deserving respect and care." Therefore, the Earth is the Super mother of which every mother in the family is a real representative. Understanding the earth as a mother brings in the qualities of love, empathy, care and respect and these helped traditional Africans in promoting the good health of their environment. To Mawere(2013, 6), and this applies to most traditional Africa, "Unlike in modern Zimbabwe where expert science is officially used as the sole agent for environmental conservation, pre-colonial Zimbabwe deployed a myriad of traditional strategies enshrined in indigenous knowledge system to conserve the natural environment." These strategies include taboos,

folktales, totems and the conception of the environment as divine and as common property. Some lands, trees, animals and even human beings were dedicated to the gods. So the conception of the earth as a mother to be loved and cherished, as was applicable in African traditional matriarchal society, will help not only feminism but more so contemporary society towards the conserving of the environment.

Evaluation

One of the main obstacles towards gender equality especially in third world countries is colonialism. Although colonialism has come and gone in many parts of the world especially Africa its impacts have refused to go or it has continued to exist as neocolonialism. If colonialism is a tragedy to an African man then it is a double tragedy to an African woman. Woman is mostly affected by colonialism Hence, Ladner (2009: 65) was quick to note that "there can be no doubt that indigenous women have been disproportionately affected by colonialism." This is why it is important to talk about the decolonisation of gender before one can talk about gender equality. Again, Ladner (2009: 72), asserts that "decolonisation must, therefore be a degendered project. It must be a project that is grounded in indigenous understandings of gender…" This is why it is important to re-evaluate matriarchy in traditional Africa, as has been done in this research, to understand what roles both male and female genders played in traditional Africa. Some elements of traditional African values are still in existence. There has to be conscious living out of these values, especially as regards matriarchy in contemporary society.

An important aspect of the African person that needs to be decolonized is the mind. This is because the mind is the centre of human activities and conscious living. In this vein, Isife (2022a: 113) argues that " the decolonisation of the African mind will channel the people's attention to unfolding indigenous ways of knowing and being as well as the important indigenous ways to move forward." In Africa, there should be a conscious introduction of African values, especially as regards matriarchy and the roles of gender in traditional Africa, into the school curriculum. Children should be made to internalize these values beginning from their homes, to the schools and religious affiliations. The government should also try to make laws and formulate policies drawn from traditional African values which will be geared towards the advancement of gender equality in public places. Unfortunately, Nigeria is still far from actualizing the United Nation's 35% affirmative action for women. So matriarchy in traditional Africa can only be

relevant to contemporary feminism if contemporary Africa begins to apply its principles in her daily activities.

On the other hand, there are also aspects of traditional African matriarchy that are not relevant to the contemporary world. The story of women in traditional Africa is not entirely positive. Although women have some spheres of power in traditional Africa, yet women were not always treated as men's equals especially in marriage and inheritance of family property. Women in some parts of Africa do not inherit their father's property. Also, widows in most traditional societies were treated badly. Omegoha(2022: 33) lament this ugly situation that "apart from that, women have similar status with children, and in like manner were beaten frequently by men. They were treated as objects, not people." This maltreatment of women by society was carried on to present-day African society. Efforts are being made and should be more concerted, by all stakeholders to make women free from domination, maltreatment, subjugation and objectification by society. The values of matriarchy should be amplified with the modern values of democracy to create an equitable society for both men and women.

Conclusion

Many evolutionist scholars presented patriarchy and matriarchy as two opposing principles of which one should be allowed to stay. For these scholars, patriarchy is superior to matriarchy and is the summit of human development. Colonialism rode at the back of this theory and contributed in no small measure to the exploitation and subjugation of women. Feminism that rose to fight Western patriarchy followed the same principle as patriarchy and alienated third-world women, especially black women. Hence, traditional African matriarchy can provide an alternative to feminism towards fighting for gender equality. And traditional African matriarchy provides a better principle or rather a paradigm to underscore, understand and understudy the distinction of sexes, and gender roles as regards gender equality in contemporary society. Africa is a starting point towards implementing the values of traditional African matriarchy not only because these values are coming from Africa but more so because African women are worst hit by gender inequality in contemporary society.

References

Abendroth, H. and Smith K.P. (2008). "Matriarchies as Societies of Peace," in *Off Our Backs* 38, (1), 49 – 52

Allen, A.T.(1999). " Feminism, Social Science, and the Meanings of Modernity: Debate on theOrigin of the Family in Europe and

the United States, 1860 – 1914, in *The American Historical Review* 104,(4), 1085 – 1914.

Amadiume, I. (1998). *Re–Inventing African Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*. London & New York: Zed Books Ltd.

Asiimire, D. and Twinamatsiko, M. (2021). "Pan African Feminist Perspectives Promoting in Matriarchy. Women in Pre-colonial Linguistic Power Loss and the Contemporary State of Affairs Ankole Sub Region," *Open Access Library Journal* 8, e7870, 1 – 19. Retrieved July 24, 2023, from https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1107870.

Asouzo, I. (2004). *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection*. Calabar: University of Calabar.

Bahlieda, R. (2015). "The Legacy of Patriarchy," in *Counterpoints: Patriarchy, Leadership and Education* 488, 15 – 67.

Bachofen,J.J.(1861). *Das Mutterrecht*. Stuttgart: Verlag von Krais & Hoffmann.

Bakytzhanova. A. (2020). "The Development of Contemporary Feminism," Retrieved July 24, 2023 from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350453092.

Basden, G.T. (1983). *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. Lagos: University Publishing Co.

Bohr, N. (1934). *Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burkett, E., & Brunell, L. (2020). "Feminism" Retrieved July 24, 2023, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism

Carswell. G. (2003). "Food Crops as Cash Crops: The Case of Colonial Kigezi, Uganda," in *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3, 521 – 551. Retrieved July 24, 2023, from https://doi.org/10.1111/1471 - 0366.00065.

Dean, J. (2010). *Re-Thinking Contemporary Feminist Politics*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dine, G. (2007). *Traditional Leadership as a Sample of African Democracy among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*. Enugu; Snaap Press Nig.LTD.

Diop, C.(1989). *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. London: Karnak House.

Easton, E.(2012). "Feminism," *Studies in Iconography, Special Issue Medieval Art History Today - Critical Terms* 33, 99 – 112.

Farrar, T. (1997). "The Queen-mother, Matriarchy, and the Question of Female PoliticalAuthority in Pre-colonial West African Matriarchy," in *Journal of Black Studies* 27, (5), 579 – 597.

Gould, J. and Kolb, W.(1964). *A Dictionary of Social Sciences*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

Herr, R.S.(2014). "Reclaiming Third World Feminism: or Why Transnational Feminism Needs Third World Feminism," *Meridians* 12, (1), 1 – 30.

Isife, E.E & Agbanusi A. (2022a). "Decolonization of the African Mind Through Indigenous Education: A Philosophical Proposal," *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy* 13 (1), 109 –111.

Isife, E.E.(2022b). "Traditional African Identity: The Old in a New Relevance," in *APPON Philosophical Quarterly* 1, (2), 48 – 60.

Kanu, I.A.(2021). "Ala Deity in Igbo – African Religion and Environmental Sustainability," in Ikechukwu A. Kanu(ed.), *Eco Philosophy: Cosmology, Consciousness and the Environment*. Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies, 109 – 122.

Kanu, I. A. (2012). The Genders in Christian Anthropology vis-a-vis the Experience of Violence by Women in Nigeria. *International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies* (AFRREV LALIGENS). Vol. 1. No.2. June 2012. pp. 1-14.

Kanu, I. A. (2011). Women Experience of Violence and the Resurrection Faith. *African Journal of Contextual Theology*. Vol. 3. June. pp.125-138.

Kanu, I. A. (2012). The Equality of Sexes in J. S. Mill vis-a-vis the Participation of Women in the Nigerian Labour and Economy. *The International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies* (AFRREV LALIGENS). Vol. 1. No.1. March 2012. pp. 18-29.

Ladner, K.L. (2009). "Gendering Decolonisation, Decolonising Gender," in *Australian Indigenous Law Review* 13, (1), 67 – 77.

Maine, H.S. (1861). *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and its Relation to Modern Ideas*. London: John Murray Publishers.

Mawere, M. (2013). "Traditional Environment Conservation Strategies in Pre–Colonial Africa: Lessons from Zimbabwe to Forget or to Carry Forward into the Future," in *Afro-Asian Journal of Social Science* 4, (4), 123

Okonjo, K. (1976). "The Dual Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in J.H Naney and G.B Edna (eds.), *Women in Africa*. Stanford: University of California.

Omegoha, F.(2022). *The Beauty of Women in Politics: Nigerian Perspective*. Enugu: Black Belt Konzult Ltd.

Onukawa, M.C.(1998). "Kwe – Names and the Complementary Dual Concepts in Igbo" in *Anthropos* 93, (1/3), 202 -208

Sesanti, S.(2016). " African Philosophy in Pursuit of an African Renaissance for the True Liberation of African Women," in *Journal of Black Studies* 47,(6), 479 – 496

Snyder, R.C.(2008). "What is Third World – Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 34, (.1), 175 – 196.

Uberoi, P.(1995). "Problems with Patriarchy: Conceptual Issues in Anthropology and Feminism," in *Sociological Bulletin* 44, (2), 195 – 221.

Staples, R. (1981). "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy," in *The Black Scholar* 12,(6), 26 – 34.

Taiwo, A.O.(2010). "Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation," in *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, (6), 229 – 338

Taylor, G.R. (1970). *Sex in History*. New York: Vanguard Press.

Warren, K.J. (1994). "Critical Thinking and Feminism," in Kerry Walters (ed.), *Re-Thinking Reason. New Perspectives in Critical Thinking*. Labany: State University of New York Press.

Williams, W. (2003). "Patriarchy, Ideology and Feminism: Some Critical Notes," in West African Journal of Philosophical Studies 6,72 – 89.

View publication stats